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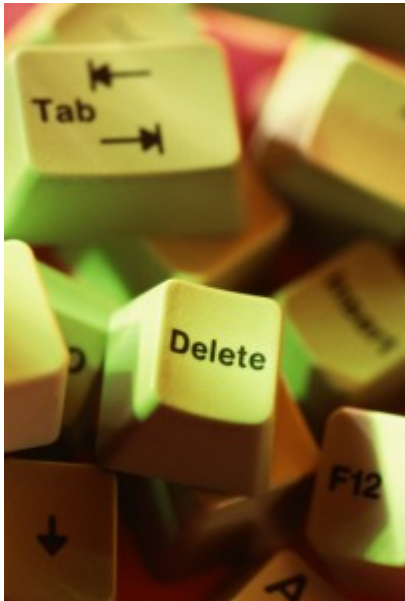
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STARTING THE CONVERSATION ON THE ADA AND WEB ACCESSIBILITY

July 30, 2010 by JoLynne Lyon



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The people at WebAIM have long advocated for better web accessibility, so executive director Cyndi Rowland wrote a happy blog earlier this week on their website after learning that the Department of Justice is investigating applying the Americans with Disabilities Act to the Internet (WebAIM is an initiative of the CPD).

"In short, the Department is seeking comments on their desire to revise regulation to '...establish specific requirements for State and local governments and public accommodations to make their websites accessible to individuals with disabilities,'" she wrote. "The Department is seeking specific comment on many things including the standards they should adopt, and if there should be any exemptions for certain entities (e.g., small business) before they publish their Notice of Proposed Rulemaking. This is amazing news! The impact that this will have for individuals with disabilities cannot be expressed."

The blog was cited by Slashdot, a technical news website. The Chronicle of Higher Education also blogged on the development and quoted WebAIM's Jonathan Whiting. Education Week's Digital Education blog has also looked at the topic.

These blogs, in turn, started more discussion on web accessibility. It wasn't all happy, particularly on the slashdot site.

"If they don't cater to a particular audience, that audience doesn't have to visit the site," said one commenter. "Not that this is specific to this aspect of the ADA; the same applies to brick-and-mortar stores as well. What gives anyone the right to use legal force against a business owner who doesn't configure his property so that it caters to particular people?"

Another said, "This is about every citizen having equal access to government, for example."

And it goes on for at least 290 comments.

Some of the responses surprised WebAIM Executive Director Cyndi Rowland. "It is important for those of us who are disability advocates to hear how others process disability-rights information. This experience made me think that I am more insular than I would want to believe," she said. "I did not know that some of these opinions still existed. With that said, we need to move forward with an understanding that they do."

WebAIM Associate Director Jared Smith addressed the topic and what it means for websites and web designers today on the WebAIM blog. In his post, he both refutes the notion that ADA requirements will send web pages back to the 1990s and agrees that implementation will be tricky.

"The ADA and its implementation is far from perfect, but I believe that we live in a world where people with disabilities should have opportunities to engage in commerce and online activities uninhibited by discrimination," he wrote. "This has generally not occurred to date."

Here's to some good discussion.

